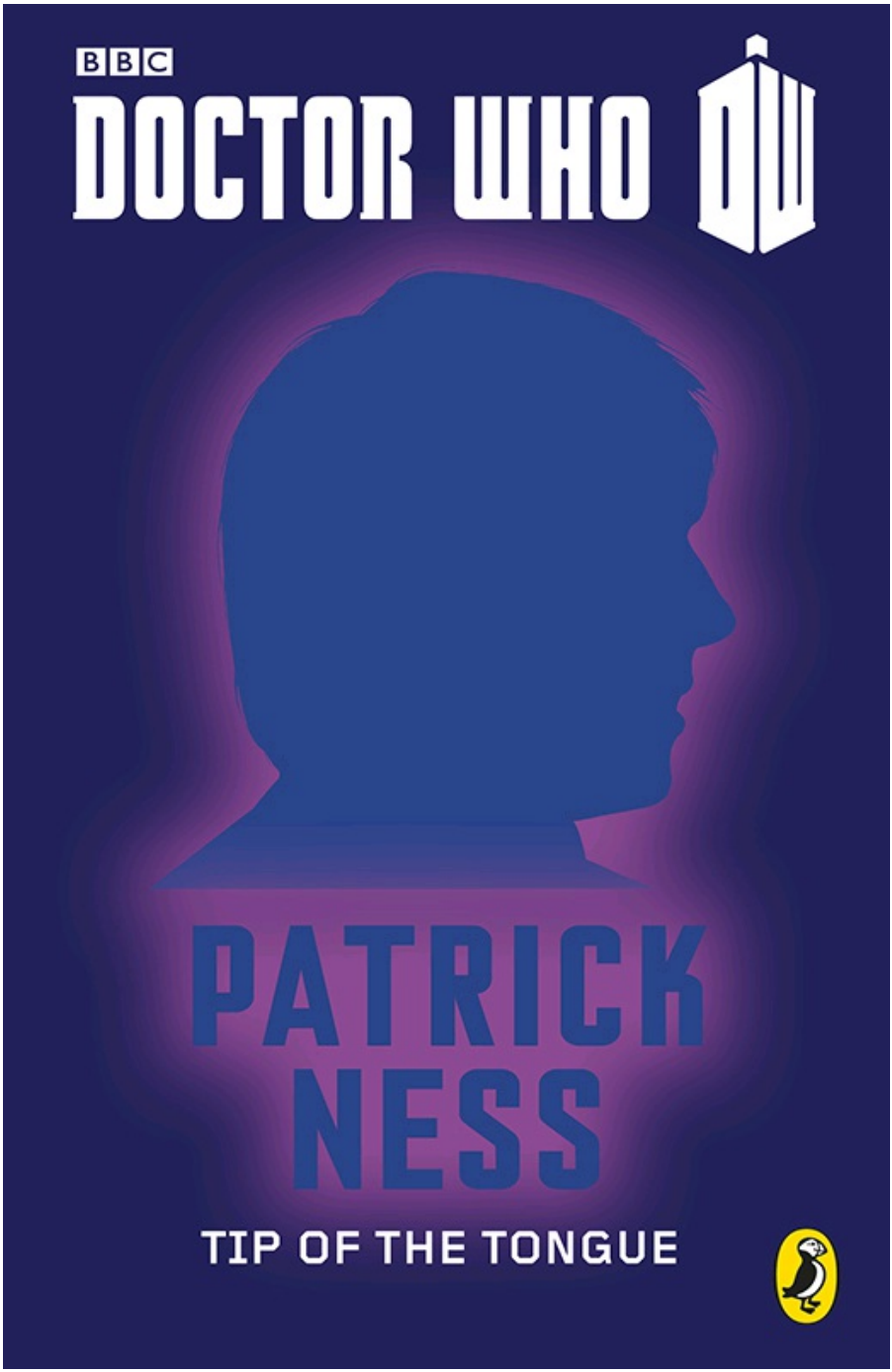
BBC

DOCTOR WHO

PATRICK NESS

TIP OF THE TONGUE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Contents

About Patrick Ness

Books by Patrick Ness

TIP OF THE TONGUE

About Patrick Ness

Born in Virginia, USA, Patrick Ness spent his upbringing in the states of Hawaii, Washington and California before moving permanently to the UK. He is the author of the Chaos Walking trilogy: *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, *The Ask and the Answer* and *Monsters of Men*, which established him as one of the most original and exciting writers of today. The trilogy has won many awards including the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, the Costa Children's Book Award, the Booktrust Teenage Prize

and the CILIP Carnegie Medal. Following a major rights deal with US studio Lionsgate (makers of

blockbuster *The Hunger Games*) the first film is currently being written by Oscar-winning screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*).

Patrick's sixth book, *A Monster Calls*, received high critical acclaim and is the winner of the Children's Book of the Year Award at the Galaxy National Book Awards, the Red House Children's

Book Award and the UKLA Children's Book Prize. In June 2012, *A Monster Calls* became the first book ever to win both prestigious CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals.

His highly anticipated new novel for adults, *The Crane Wife*, was inspired by a Japanese folk tale and published by Canongate in April 2013.

A daring new YA novel, *More Than This*, is forthcoming later this year from Walker (Candlewick in the US).

Patrick's earlier works include the adult novel *The Crash of Hennington*, short-story collection *Topics About Which I Know Nothing*, varied journalism and radio plays. He was Booktrust's first ever writer in residency and has taught creative writing.

Books by Patrick Ness

The Crane Wife

A Monster Calls

Monsters of Men

The Ask and the Answer

The Knife of Never Letting Go

Topics About Which I Know Nothing

The Crash of Hennington

Tip of the Tongue

‘Is it broken?’ Jonny asked, frowning.

Nettie’s face looked like she was ready for this. ‘It can’t *break*,’ she said. ‘It’s alive. Or something.’

‘Well, *sick*, then.’

‘It’s fine. Look, do you want it or not?’

Jonny again felt the money he had wrapped in a tight roll in his pocket. Two dollars. A king’s

ransom, almost six months of saving the nickel tips he got from his job as a busboy at Mr Finnegan’s diner. He gave the bulk of his wages to his mother, of course; they needed every penny now that his dad was overseas fighting this war against Hitler.

But Nettie’s family needed the money, too (went the argument Jonny had rehearsed a dozen times in his head for the inevitable moment his mother blew her top when she found out how much money he

was about to spend). Nettie’s dad had died just after she was born, but while Jonny’s mother could find good war work at Temperance’s local factory making shells for tanks, Nettie’s mother couldn’t.

Nettie’s mother was black, and even though this was Maine and not the deep south, Mr Acklin, the factory owner, had found ways to keep Nettie’s mother out of a job. She was supporting herself and Nettie on a cleaner’s salary that could barely keep Nettie in school clothes.

Jonny's mother knew this. She and Nettie's mother had been friends ever since Jonny and Nettie

had met as five-year-olds at the town's one public school, their moms quickly coming together in the way that outcasts sometimes do. The mother of the town's only mixed-race girl and the Jewish mother of the small boy with the German last name.

She'll understand, Jonny thought, rolling the money between his fingers. *Won't she?*

'You're sure it'll work?' Jonny said.

Nettie sighed, sounding twenty years older than her own fourteen. 'It worked for Uncle Paul,' she said.

'He'll get mad that you sold it –'

'He's on a tropical island by Australia somewhere shooting at people in swamps.'

Nettie's young uncle had rented a room from her mother before he'd shipped out. There was a

harsh anxiety in Nettie's voice that she wasn't altogether successful in disguising. 'He's got other things to worry about.'

Jonny was still hesitant. Nettie gave an exasperated *tut*. 'Try it!' she practically shouted. 'If it doesn't work, you don't have to buy it. We can forget the whole thing.'

'OK,' Jonny finally said, holding out his hand. Nettie placed the Truth Teller in his palm. It stared up at him balefully, its yellow eyes full of weary sadness. 'It looks depressed.'

'If it was a machine, I'd fix it,' Nettie said, impatiently. Which was true. She could fix nearly anything. Jonny's bike several times, a door at his house that had never hung properly. Her Uncle Paul had been great with his hands and a worshipful Nettie had mooned around him for years like the

world's most devoted younger sister, almost accidentally learning how to repair toasters and change the oil in a Studebaker. 'All I can tell you is that Paul said it worked.'

Jonny gently poked the small frown in his hand. It said nothing, but

gave him a look of unsurprised hurt feelings.

He blew out a long breath. The Truth Teller was real. It was the closest he was ever going to get to being able to buy one. It could be his for two dollars.

And it might finally, *finally*, get Marisa Channing to notice him.

He turned it over, opened the two prongs at the back and unfurled the long body. He'd never worn one and wasn't exactly sure how it was supposed to fit, but there were only so many ways it could go.

He opened his mouth, put the two prongs on either side of his tongue, and rolled the body down over his chin and under his neck, draping it there like his face was wearing a tie.

'How's it look?' he asked, his tongue tripping a little over the prongs.

Nettie crossed her arms. 'Don't ask me. I hate those things. I don't approve of this transaction at all, remember?'

'I remember,' he said. 'How do you get it to say anything?'

'It should –' she said, reaching forward.

' *I like you only as a friend*,' the Truth Teller said, its eyes looking directly from Jonny's chin into Nettie's face.

She frowned. 'It works.'

After the two dollars was handed over and a bewildered but nervously happy Jonny went one way

back to his job at the diner and a richer but somehow still irritated Nettie went the other way back to *her* job at Mr Bacon's gas station, a blond man dressed in what seemed to be a cricketing uniform with what seemed to be a stalk of celery on his lapel, stepped out of what seemed to be absolutely nowhere with a thoughtful look on his face.

But surely none of that could be possible.

'Surely none of this can be possible,' he said, almost cheerfully.

'None of what?' said a woman with long, curly hair, stepping out of the nothingness behind him.

'They seemed like nice enough children.'

‘Yes, Nyssa,’ the man said. ‘But this is Earth, 1945.’ He took in a deep breath. There was sea salt in the air. ‘Maine, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘And?’

‘And the Dipthodat aren’t supposed to arrive here for at least a hundred years. They should still be halfway across the galaxy at this point in the timeline.’

‘So what are they doing here now, Doctor?’

‘What, indeed, Nyssa?’ the Doctor said, putting his hands in his pockets. ‘That sounds like a

question that needs answering.’

The fad had started just before summer, which made it awkward at first. There was no school to go to each day to check on what kinds of Truth Teller everyone else was wearing or what attitudes they were taking towards them or, most importantly, how fashionable they properly were. Plus, it was

wartime: if you were more than twelve (and sometimes not even that), you had a summer job to go to, labouring on farms, working in local shops, even a few kids older than Jonny or Nettie taking up summer shifts in the weapons factory for Mr Acklin.

It was, in fact, Mr Acklin’s daughter Annabelle who had shown up three days before the end of the school year, a dark blue Truth Teller mounted on her chin like one of those busty ladies on the fronts of pirate ships. Her father didn’t just own the factory, he also owned Temperance’s general store, which her mother ran, and so Annabelle was the first with every fashion that migrated its way up from the big cities to the south, from where, incidentally, the whole Acklin family had moved five years earlier and visited regularly, so she came with an inbuilt authority no other girl in Temperance could ever hope to match. She’d worn the first knee-length (instead of mid-calf) skirt the school had ever seen and was promptly sent home for it, though overnight every other girl in school had hemmed her own skirt right up to the knee and Principal Marshall, swamped with what he called ‘an outbreak akin to the Bolshevik revolution’, gave in. Annabelle was also the first to wear a real fur collar on both her winter and summer coats – coney, but dyed to look like mink, because ‘There’s a war on, you

know,’ she said – and the first to use make-up on her legs in place of

stockings after the Japanese cut off the supply of silk to America. Not that any other girl in town could have afforded silk stockings anyway, but Annabelle's powdered legs led to a full week of school-wide stains at ankle level until the principal finally did put his foot down.

'What on *earth* is that *thing* on your *face*, Miss Acklin?' he said on the first day of the Truth Tellers, as always looking like he was only just fighting off a heart attack.

Annabelle raised her head proudly. She hadn't even made it to the front doors of the school, and the rest of the school population – including, Jonny saw, Marisa Channing – had its eye on her. 'What?'

Annabelle said, affecting a what's-the-big-deal air and implying that any shock was entirely someone else's problem. 'This old thing?'

Principal Marshall's mouth opened and closed a few times as disbelief fought outrage and lost.

'Take it off this instant!'

And then it spoke.

The thing on her jaw opened its toothy mouth – edged just where the point of Annabelle's chin fell

– and a gentle, sad voice, which put Jonny immediately in mind of a sorrowful cow, rang out, quiet but in a strange, impossible way that carried to every eagerly listening ear.

' *You are a bald man*,' the voice said, ' *and your wife is not visiting her sister in Boca Raton. She ran off with Mr Edmundsen at the bakery. Everyone knows this, yes.* '

'You could have heard a mosquito burp,' Nettie said later of the silence that followed, and indeed you could have. Principal Marshall's face grew redder and redder until he finally shouted, 'How

dare you!'

'It's only the truth,' Annabelle said, eyes bright. 'How can you punish anyone for the truth?'

Speechless, Principal Marshall's eyes opened wide and unfortunately that allowed a moment for

everyone to reflect that, yes, Principal Marshall was, in fact, a bald

man and it *was* widely known that Mrs Marshall had been the bakery's most enthusiastic customer before it mysteriously shut and she left for her sisterly 'visit' shortly thereafter.

Annabelle was suspended, of course, sent home immediately pending further disciplinary action,

but not before telling everyone how there was a stock of Truth Tellers in her mother's shop for

anyone who might be interested in buying one.

Further disciplinary actions never materialized. Annabelle's parents were the richest, most

powerful, and frankly scariest people in town, and though no one actually *liked* Mr Acklin (How could you? The smarm, the big-city arrogance, the way he threw his money around, including tearing down the town's one big mansion to build a new one in its place. In wartime!), no one could afford to oppose him either. Although the Truth Tellers were never officially allowed on school grounds, that didn't stop crowds of people, young and old, man and woman, anyone who could afford them, really, and often even those who couldn't, from buying them in their droves.

' *Your posterior is demonstrably too wide for that dress*,' Jonny would hear from the sidewalk as he emptied the rubbish from the diner. The woman whose posterior was in question would turn

around in horrified anger, but the man behind her would already be shrugging with a smirk not masked by the Truth Teller draped over his chin. 'These pesky things,' he'd say. 'Can't argue with the truth, huh?'

At which point the woman's own Truth Teller would say, ' *Your breath has always smelled like*

that of a person long dead. And no one believes your excuse of flat feet for not enlisting with the rest of our brave soldiers. '

Both parties would leave angry and frustrated and somehow even more ready to inflict truth on

somebody else.

Within two weeks of the sale of the first Truth Teller, Temperance's

small jail was full to bursting with minor assault cases, some between people who had up until that moment been lifelong friends.

Its small courthouse was hearing filing after filing of new divorces from couples who had otherwise been happy since before the Great Depression. The town's ineffective council begged Mr Acklin to stop selling the 'damned things' but he said there was no reason to, as it was, after all, 'just a passing fancy. We'll all move on to the next thing soon enough. For instance, have you heard of this thing called a hula hoop? Just a dollar ninety-nine down at the shop …'

But like many fads misunderstood by the aged – i.e. anyone over the age of twenty – the Truth

Tellers found a secondary, but thriving underground market in the school-age population of

Temperance. As mothers and fathers returned the Truth Tellers to the shop at great speed (for no refund, of course), an unofficial subculture developed. At the Horizon, Temperance's only movie

palace, hordes of matinee youths would gather in their seats, wait for the lights to go down, and then quietly slip on the Truth Tellers abandoned by their older relatives or, in rarer cases, bought second-hand with their own money under the counter in Mrs Acklin's shop, never a woman to turn a blind eye when there was cash to be made.

Hardly anyone would be watching the newsreel as a Truth Session, as they came to be known,

started in the first five rows of the balcony.

' *Troy Davis likes you but not as much as you think he does, nor in the manner in which you*

would wish. '

' *You think your hair looks like the cinematic star Veronica Lake while everyone else comments behind your back on its resemblance to a horse's mane. This is not said in any way that might be taken as a compliment.* '

' *You are too selfish and loud and the spirits of your friends fall when you walk into a room.*'

' *Troy Davis's story about getting Debbie Madison in the family way so that she had to move is a lie.* '

‘ *You have a faint odour that people discuss behind your back.* ’

‘ *Everyone knows your father is a drunk*.’

‘ *Your thighs are just as fat as you think they are.* ’

‘ *You, Troy Davis, are saving your affections for another member of your basketball team in a way that would not be widely accepted by the societal attitudes of this time period and location*.’

The Truth Sessions were spearheaded by Annabelle Acklin, of course, who would choose

whoever that day’s victim might be. Well, not her, exactly, it was completely out of her hands, wasn’t it? It was the Truth Teller who had all the truths to tell, and truth, after all, could neither be denied nor hidden nor defended against. And if sometimes after the Session, people withdrew from their social circle or decided to sit forever in another part of the classroom or even – like when Troy Davis lied about his age to enlist and was immediately shipped overseas – people left altogether, then perhaps Temperance could do without them, no?

Jonny had never been to a Truth Session. Not high enough up the school food chain. Plus, too short, too foreign-seeming – with that last name that hung on him like a sack of wheat – he was, frankly, too invisible to have even registered on the radar of someone like Annabelle Acklin.

That would change, though. Oh, yes, that was about to change.

Because Jonny knew that *Marisa* went to Truth Sessions, though he didn’t think she’d ever been the focus of one, just contributed with the pearly pink Truth Teller her father had bought her for her birthday.

Beautiful, tall, elegant Marisa. With her one stray freckle and her flowing blonde hair and her

otherworldliness that made her seem like an angel.

All words Jonny would have rather died than say out loud.

Still, wouldn’t she be surprised when Jonny showed up in the balcony with a Truth Teller of his

very own?

‘This old thing?’ he’d say.

He wouldn't say he'd bought it used from Nettie.

(For her part, Nettie had never been within a mile of a Truth Session and he knew she wouldn't

have gone even if invited by Annabelle Acklin herself.

Sometimes he didn't understand Nettie at all.)

'The strangest thing happened today,' his mother said, hanging her coat on the hook in the kitchen.

Jonny was peeling the two potatoes they would have for an early dinner before he went off to his evening shift at Mr Finnegan's Diner. His mother always came in from the factory smelling strongly of iron and oil, and by the time she'd washed – with the water he'd warmed for her on the stove –

dinner would be ready. They'd eat, Jonny would go back to work and his mother would start the

sewing she did for extra cash. Sometimes Nettie's mom would come over, too, and more than once

he'd returned home to find them in their separate chairs, cups of 'war coffee' on the table between them, both completely asleep, sewing half-done in their laps.

'What strange thing?' Jonny asked, when she didn't continue. He sliced the second potato and

dropped it into the boiling water.

'What?' his mother said, distracted. He glanced over. She was looking at the picture of his father she'd hung by the door, touching her fingers to it, not saying anything. Despite their last name and despite the fact that both sets of Jonny's grandparents were as German as could be, his father'd had no trouble finding a place in the US Army and was now over there in Europe, fighting people to

whom they were probably distantly related. Funny what war did, huh?

'The strange thing?' Jonny said, gently.

'Oh!' she said, sitting down wearily at the kitchen table. 'Yes. We had an inspection.'

Jonny added a few ounces of peas to the boiling potatoes. Those and a little butter and salt would be their entire dinner. ‘Why is that weird?’

‘It was this man and woman. British, I think, which was strange enough, but she was wearing

trousers, if you can believe it, and he wore all white clothes to inspect a factory!’ She sat back in her chair as if the disbelief had pushed her there. ‘He didn’t seem to ever get dirty, though.’

Jonny kept cooking, trying to ignore the Truth Teller in his pocket, which in his mind blared there like a siren, shouting at the top of its lungs (did they have lungs?), and he’d been wondering since his mother entered why she hadn’t been able to hear it.

But of course it made no actual sound. They didn’t unless they were being worn. They didn’t do

anything unless they were being worn. You never needed to feed them, they never needed cleaning up after, they just watched you, sadly, until you put them on your chin and they told all the truths you weren’t brave enough to say yourself.

Like, as a purely random example, telling your mother you’d spent two whole dollars on a Truth

Teller when you could only afford meat once a fortnight.

‘Mom,’ he started.

‘You should have seen Mr Acklin, though,’ his mother chuckled to herself. ‘I think I can be happy with anything that makes that man squirm.’

‘Mom,’ Jonny said again.

‘Kept asking everyone about those God-awful Truth Tellers,’ his mother said.

Jonny froze. His mother didn’t. ‘Oh, I hated those things,’ she frowned. ‘People being rude all the time and acting like it’s brave, acting like it’s *your* fault if you get upset that they’ve been horrible to you.’ She looked up at him. ‘I know you kids like them, but I’m so glad you never got one, Jon.’

Jonny said nothing. She brushed a strand of hair out of her eye. ‘What

was it you were going to

say?' she asked, innocent as anything.

'Nothing,' Jonny said. 'Just … the washing water's ready. If you want it.'

'Thanks, *Liebchen*,' she said. She stood and kissed him on the forehead. He let her. 'You're a good boy.'

She took the pan of water out to the washroom and Jonny just stood there at the stove, letting the steam from his boiling dinner blow over him.

'So did it work?' Nettie asked him as they rode along. She'd caught up with him on his way to his evening shift. She was returning home from her day at the town's sole gas station. She was supposed to just run the till in the small store there, but with her Uncle Paul-inspired flair for fixing things, and in the absence of all the professional mechanics who'd been snapped up by the war, she ended up

spending most of her time changing fan belts and replacing spark plugs. She smelled more of

chemicals than his mother did. 'Did you get your truths told?'

'I haven't had time to properly try it yet,' Jonny said.

They rode along in silence for a moment, Jonny pedalling away, Nettie coasting skilfully and riding in easy curves as she always did.

'Don't be …' Nettie started, but didn't finish.

'Don't be what?'

Nettie stopped her bike. Jonny stopped his, too. They were a block away from the Diner, a block

away from where Nettie would turn to the poorer part of town she and her mom called home.

'With Marisa,' Nettie said, not quite meeting Jonny's eye. 'Don't be surprised if it doesn't … get you what you want from her.'

Jonny felt every inch of his skin start to burn red. The sun was setting and he could only hope it was too dark for Nettie to see him blushing. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said, his voice only

squeaking a little bit.

‘Girls like that …’ Nettie started, but didn’t say what girls like that were like. All Jonny heard in her silence was ‘ *never look at boys like you*’.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said again, more angrily this time and pedalled away from her, leaving Nettie to watch him go.

‘I have a very large nose,’ the Truth Teller said into the mirror. ‘And my forehead is greasy and will undoubtedly fill with acne as I grow older.’

‘Well, don’t tell people *that*,’ Jonny said, his tongue still tripping a little on the Truth Teller’s prongs.

It stopped talking and looked at him sadly. Jonny wasn’t on a break, and he could only really hang around the bathroom for maybe another minute before Mr Finnegan would come knocking loudly,

yelling that there were tables to clear.

But Jonny had looked up from his crate of dirty dishes to see Annabelle Acklin and three of her

friends come in to sit at a booth and drink milkshakes. Two of those friends were Virginia Watson and Edith Magee.

The third was Marisa Channing.

Jonny had bolted to the bathroom. In the small mirror, he’d tried to shape his unruly hair into

something approaching normal, wiped stray mustard from his lips where he’d been stealing leftover French fries, and tried to calm his breathing to lower than hyperventilation.

Then he’d taken the Truth Teller out of his pocket and popped it in his mouth.

It wasn’t going particularly well.

‘ *I am afraid that the war will not end in time*,’ it said, ‘ *and I will be shipped off to fight and I will die.* ’

Jonny shifted from foot to foot. ‘Well, everyone’s afraid of that. Aren’t they?’

‘ *Mr Finnegan is about to knock*,’ it said.

‘What are you doing in there?’ Mr Finnegan said through the door, knocking on it with a hammer

blow. ‘These tables won’t clear themselves.’

Jonny took out the Truth Teller and shoved it back into his pocket. ‘I’ll be right out,’ he said.

Jonny neared the booth where the girls were sitting. They were all drinking their milkshakes through straws over the tops of their Truth Tellers.

‘ *You really should hide your ears more with your hairstyle*,’ Annabelle’s was saying to Edith Magee. ‘ *They stick out*.’

‘ *I am afraid of you*,’ Edith’s Truth Teller said. ‘ *I will do anything you say*.’

‘Don’t I know it?’ Annabelle said with a smile. Then she saw Jonny. ‘What are you staring at?’

‘Nothing,’ he stammered, only realizing just then that he *was* staring. He held the crate of dirty dishes under one arm, but his free hand went into his pocket, reaching for his own Truth Teller.

‘ *You have a very large nose*,’ Annabelle’s Truth Teller said before he could get to it.

‘ *And very oily skin*,’ Virginia Watson’s said.

‘ *Are you not of the Jewish persuasion?* ’ Edith’s said.

‘ *And definitely German*,’ Annabelle’s said. ‘ *With your cumbersome last name, you could be a traitor to this country*.’

‘I’m not –’ Jonny started.

‘ *And how very short you are*,’ Virginia’s said.

‘ *And ugly*.’

‘ *And do you think those three hairs under your nose are a moustache?* ’

‘ *And no one knows who you are.* ’

‘ *And no one ever will*.’

Jonny turned and fled, the dishes in the crate jangling under his arm. He slammed them down on the counter in the kitchen.

‘Hey!’ Mr Finnegan shouted from the grill. ‘You break any of those, you’re replacing them out of your tips.’

Jonny just breathed heavily for a moment. His only small consolation was that Marisa Channing’s

Truth Teller hadn’t said a word.

But was that a good thing? Or was it the worst thing of all?

‘Two chocolate milkshakes,’ Jonny said, moments later, placing the drinks in the corner booth

without making eye contact with the people sitting there.

‘He seems to be the only employee in this whole establishment,’ Nyssa said as she watched Jonny

go, ‘aside from the proprietor.’

‘There *is* a war on,’ the Doctor said, sniffing his drink. ‘Just chocolate and milk and frozen cream.’

He took a sip. ‘Delicious.’

‘Doctor,’ Nyssa said, slightly impatiently. She was watching the booth of four girls two tables

down. ‘You said they were in terrible danger.’

The Doctor turned and followed her gaze. ‘And so they are. The Dipthodat are merciless. They

hide in plain sight, lulling a planet into accepting them. And then …’

He didn’t finish.

‘Oughtn’t we do something?’ Nyssa asked.

‘In time,’ the Doctor said. ‘We need to find out their source. Ah.’ The girls at the booth had risen as one. The Doctor didn’t stop drinking his milkshake as he watched them put on their summer coats and go

laughing out of the front door. ‘Time to go,’ he said, taking a last slurp and moving to leave.

He paused, then put down two dollars as a tip.

‘Didn’t it work?’ Nettie said, from underneath the car, a shiny new one, even though they were as rare as hen’s teeth in wartime.

‘I don’t know,’ Jonny said, looking at the Truth Teller in his hand. ‘Sort of. I guess.’

There was a pause in the clanking sounds Nettie was making. ‘You didn’t do it, did you?’

Jonny didn’t answer. Which was an answer in itself.

‘Why do you like her, anyway?’ Nettie said. ‘Marisa Channing barely even knows you’re alive.’

‘She knows it a little more now.’

Nettie scooted out from under the car. She had oil smudged on her cheek. ‘You got your own little Truth Session, didn’t you?’

Again, Jonny answered by not answering. Nettie shook her head and rolled back underneath the

car. He was visiting Nettie on his lunch-break the day after the unpleasantness at the Diner. He had to get back in a few minutes, but still he sat in the garage of the petrol station, the sun shining through the open door. The Truth Teller in his hand stared back up at him like it always did. Mournfully.

‘Where do these come from anyway?’ he asked.

‘Europe,’ Nettie said. ‘Or South America or something. Paul said he thought it was a chemical

thing they were trying out for the war –’

‘Well, well, well,’ a voice boomed from the doorway, shadowing it suddenly. ‘What do we have

here?’ It was Mr Acklin himself, suddenly looming. He stepped inside, his expensive coat billowing out behind him in the slight breeze.

He wore a Truth Teller over his thin beard.

‘ *The town’s mixed-race girl working on your automobile*,’ it said, sadly, ‘ *along with the town’s only Jew.* ’

‘The town’s only *German* Jew,’ Mr Acklin sneered, looking at Jonny. ‘Isn’t that right, Mr Heftklammern?’

And there it was. The two-ton weight of his last name. It had been the bane of his growing up. So undeniably German, especially with the rise of Mr Hitler, as if small, Jewish Jonny Heftklammern didn’t feel like enough of an outsider amongst the Protestant giants of Temperance, Maine.

It wasn’t even a proper German name. His father’s father had immigrated just after World War I

and, given that that was another war fought against Germany, had been advised to anglicize the family name upon arrival in the United States. This had originally been intended as simply changing Mueller to Miller, but starving and sleepless after a lengthy, awful sea journey, Grandpa Dietrich had quailed at the stern face of the immigration clerk. Unable to remember his long-practised speech about his name, he had glanced at the clerk’s desk and blurted out the first thing he saw.

Heftklammern was the German word for ‘staples’.

Mr Acklin shook his head, an unpleasant smile hovering above the Truth Teller. ‘How’s your

mother, Miss Washington?’ he asked Nettie, who had scooted back out from underneath the car.

‘This is your car?’ was Nettie’s only answer.

‘Yes, indeed,’ Mr Acklin said. ‘Just bought it. And imagine my surprise to find the coloured

daughter of a maid working on it.’

Nettie got carefully to her feet and swallowed nervously, wrench still in her hand. Jonny felt a sudden flash in his stomach, surprised at how much he hated seeing Nettie look nervous.

‘It needs some work on the clutch –’ she started.

‘I wonder what the town would think if they knew who Mr Bacon had

looking after its

automobiles.'

'They've been fine with it so far,' Nettie said.

Mr Acklin smiled. 'Have they?' he said. 'Shall we find out for certain?'

He took a sudden step towards her. She – angry, defiant, but still a foot shorter – stepped back.

'Hey!' Jonny said, leaping to his feet, and when he turned to look, saw Nettie stumble. She fell back against the pearly black paint of Mr Acklin's car –

The wrench in her hand scraping a curlicue dent all the way down the side as she fell.

For a moment, there was nothing moving but the dust in the sunlight.

Then Mr Acklin smiled. Again.

'You're going to pay for that,' Mr Acklin said.

His Truth Teller added, ' *I will make sure you never work here again*.'

'And that's the truth,' Mr Acklin finished. 'You can't argue with the truth, now, can you?'

He left, again momentarily blocking the sun streaming through the open door, calling out Mr

Bacon's name.

'He can't do that,' Jonny said. 'It was an accident.'

'He can try,' Nettie said, angrily. 'And you know he'll get his way.' She picked up the wrench

again and made to swing at the window of Mr Acklin's car.

'Don't!' Jonny said. Nettie stopped mid-swing. 'He'll only make you pay for the glass, too.'

She dropped the wrench to her side, sighing. 'What am I going to do now?'

Jonny suddenly remembered the two dollars that someone had amazingly, *bafflingly*, left him as a tip the night before. He took it out of his pocket and handed it to her. 'Take this.'

Nettie frowned at him. 'I don't need your *charity*.'

'Take it as a second payment,' he said, holding up his Truth Teller.

'That's not the price we agreed –'

'A *loan*, then.' He still held out the money. 'To pay for the dent.'

Nettie grunted and then took it. 'A loan.' She looked out through the door. 'But this isn't over. Mr Bacon can't just –'

She stopped, because Mr Bacon – as if the sound of his own name had conjured him up – entered,

Mr Acklin striding in behind him.

'Nettie,' Mr Bacon said, and the look on his face was all the news anyone needed.

A bell rang at the door of Mrs Acklin's shop. She stood up from behind the counter, the smile on her face freezing as she saw the very oddly dressed man and woman coming through. Then she got a

shrewd look. Maybe *other* women would like to wear trousers. Maybe it was something she could *sell* to these –

'Are you the proprietress?' the man asked.

Good Lord, was that *celery* he was wearing on his lapel?

'Yes,' said Mrs Acklin.

'Then I wonder if you could tell me where you found *these*, exactly?'

He held out his hand. In it were four Truth Tellers, including one she recognized as her daughter Annabelle's. She looked back up at him, fearfully.

Then she started to scream.

Jonny kept waiting for her to cry. Crying he was used to. His mother cried a lot, especially when she got a letter from his father, though that was mostly from an all-consuming relief that his father *could*

write letters and hadn't been eaten by the war over in Europe.

He'd also seen a lot of crying around the town, as that same war claimed husbands and sons,

brothers and boyfriends. He'd seen Nettie's mom cry when her brother, Nettie's Uncle Paul, had

shipped out for a second tour at the beginning of the summer, and seen her cry again when she shared news of him with his own mom during their sewing sessions.

He'd never seen Nettie cry, though. Not even when Paul left.

And she wasn't doing it now either.

Well, not really.

'I'm going to kill him,' she said, for the hundredth time. 'I'm going to take that wrench and I'm going to knock those racist brains out of the back of his head.'

She took a sip from the soda bottle Jonny had sneaked out from the Diner to share after his evening shift was over. He needed to get home; he'd worked all day and was beyond tired, and it was dark, and tomorrow was another day where he'd do the same all over again. But instead, he was sitting on the bus-stop bench across the street from the biggest house in town. Owned, of course, by the Acklins.

The one they'd built right in the middle of a war, which seemed almost criminal.

'People would probably appreciate it,' Jonny said. 'But then you'd go to jail.'

'At least I wouldn't have to pay for food there,' she said, bitterly.

'He can't do it,' Jonny said. 'It wasn't your fault. I'll tell Mr Bacon, and I'm sure in a couple of days –'

'If you do, Acklin might decide he doesn't like Jews much either,' Nettie said, almost calmly.

'Your mom needs that job.'

'And you need *yours*,' Jonny said. 'We'll figure something out. I promise.'

‘Oh, you promise, do you?’ she said, but the sarcasm was light and when he looked at her, her eyes were shining wet in the moonlight. When she saw him notice, she wiped them hurriedly with the back of her sleeve. ‘What am I going to tell my mom? What are we going to *do*?’

‘We’ll figure something out,’ Jonny said again. ‘I mean it.’

Nettie looked at him. ‘I know you mean it,’ she said, quietly. ‘You always mean it.’

And the way she said it made that sound like a very good thing. He looked at her now, turning her face away from him, taking another drink from the soda bottle. *I only like you as a friend*, his Truth Teller had said, and neither he nor Nettie had challenged that at all.

But seeing her now, seeing her wipe away more tears that she was hoping he didn’t notice, he

suddenly felt he’d very much like to take the wrench and bash the brains out of Mr Acklin himself, just for making Nettie look like that.

‘Nettie –’ he started.

‘Someone’s coming,’ she said, sitting up.

He looked down the street. It was a group of girls, *the* group of girls, led by Annabelle Acklin.

And there was Virginia Watson and Edith Magee. And, of course, Marisa Channing, looking like the moonlight was made just to illuminate her fresh, clear skin. They were in deep, fractured discussion, with Annabelle smiling that dangerous smile back at Virginia and Edith, who seemed to be both

arguing and crying at the same time.

None of them were wearing their Truth Tellers.

‘Now’s your chance,’ Nettie said.

Jonny started a little. For a second, he’d forgotten Nettie was there. He looked at her. Her eyes were a little defiant now, and maybe not in a nice way any more. ‘Chance for what?’ he said.

‘Chance to impress your *Marisa*,’ she said. She stood up from the bench, soda bottle still in her hand.

He looked at her for a moment more, then back at the girls still approaching up the street, obviously heading to Annabelle's house. 'You think?' he asked.

Nettie's shoulders slumped and she shook her head at him. He didn't like the look on her face at all now. ' *Idiot,*' he heard her whisper.

'Why –?'

'Just put it on,' she said. 'Let's finally see what happens when Marisa Channing hears you tell her the truth. Come on, let's see how that goes, shall we?'

'Nettie, I don't under–'

'Because you really think it's just a matter of truth, do you? She'll see that you can afford one of those awful things and that you're not afraid to say rude and horrible stuff to everyone else, but when you look at her all your truth is about how pretty her skin is and how wavy her hair is and how the world stops smelling like farts when she walks by.'

Jonny blinked at her, blushing. Most of this was pretty accurate, though he wouldn't have thought of the farts thing –

'Honestly,' Nettie said, shaking her head again. 'The lies people tell themselves and call it the truth. Well, go ahead. What are you waiting for?'

The girls were almost directly across the street now. In a second, they'd turn into Annabelle's

house and he'd have missed his chance. His stomach was pulling with how angry Nettie seemed, and it was only just now dawning on him what might be going on and what he might himself think about that. But there was also the other voice in him, the one that had looked at Marisa Channing for so long with a yearning he couldn't really describe, and she was just about to turn up the path into the Acklin house –

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Truth Teller. He ignored the look on Nettie's face as he fitted the prongs under his tongue and draped it down his chin. He pulled himself up to his not particularly impressive height, took a deep breath and stepped forward to cross the street.

Which was when the Acklin house exploded.

It wasn't just the windows blowing out or one room or a door or anything like that. The *whole thing* exploded, all three storeys of it, including the roof, outwards and upwards in a flash of fire and light.

The four girls standing in front of it and Jonny and Nettie all screamed as the blast wave flung itself at them.

Jonny didn't even think. He threw himself in front of Nettie as the *whoosh* of flames and smoke rolled towards them and they fell together into the bus stop. The fire swept over them, but it didn't burn and was gone in an instant. Protecting Nettie as much as he could – she was several inches taller than him so he had a fleeting moment to wonder what good he was doing – Jonny kept expecting to be pelted with rubble and bricks –

But there was nothing.

'Get *off* me,' Nettie finally said, pushing him away. Across the street, the four girls were bundled together in a heap on the sidewalk, but looked as uninjured and confused as Jonny and Nettie.

The Acklin house was gone. Not even burning rubble.

Just … *gone*.

'What just happened?' Jonny said.

'They build their houses out of a kind of secreted polymer,' said an accented female voice behind them. 'It's remarkably similar to your sugar, actually, which is curious.' A woman with curly brown hair and trousers was reaching down a hand to help them up. 'Might actually be where some of the candy houses come from in your folk tales.'

Stunned, Jonny took her hand and allowed himself to be pulled up. Nettie did the same.

'Either way,' the woman continued, 'it only *looked* like a house. But when the polymer is fired upon with their own weapons, it more or less vaporizes, burning quickly at a very low temperature and leaving little residue.'

Jonny and Nettie stared at her.

'Huh?' Jonny finally said.

‘Are you British?’ Nettie said, as if this was the most surprising part of the whole thing.

The woman simply smiled at them and then reached forward to touch a gentle finger to the Truth

Teller Jonny was still wearing.

‘ *I am terribly confused*,’ it said.

‘I’ll bet you are,’ the woman said. ‘But we’ve spent the day gathering up your brothers and sisters.’

‘Nyssa!’ a voice called from across the street. A man was emerging from the strange blank place

where the Acklin house used to stand.

And he wasn’t alone.

There was a small gasping sound as Virginia Watson fainted dead away. Everyone else just stood

and stared, mouths agape.

The man was leading what looked a little bit like two very tall upright sheep, but sheep that had the faces of some kind of giant fish. But also mixed with a squirrel. And a pumpkin.

The pumpkin squirrel sheep fish didn’t look happy at all. They both had their front feet/flippers bound, looking for all the world as if they were under arrest.

‘I’ve put them under arrest!’ the man called, leading them down the remains of the front path. ‘I can do that, can’t I?’

Edith Magee screamed as they approached and fled down the street, screaming all the way.

Annabelle and Marisa stayed watching, frozen, with wide-open eyes.

The British woman started across the street towards the man. She beckoned to Jonny and Nettie.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘It’s all right.’

Stunned, Jonny found himself following her. He looked back. Nettie

was following too, her face as shocked as his. She was still clutching the soda bottle.

‘And there’s the last one,’ the man said, looking at Jonny’s chin as they neared him. The sheepfish made angry-sounding cries, but they went quiet again as the man looked at them sternly.

‘What’s going on?’ Nettie asked, taking in Marisa and a wide-eyed Annabelle. ‘Who are you?’

But before the man could answer, Jonny’s Truth Teller spoke up.

‘ *You are the Doctor*,’ it said.

‘The who?’ Jonny said.

‘The what?’ Nettie asked.

But the Doctor was talking to the Truth Teller. ‘I am,’ he said. ‘And you, my little friend, are safe.’

‘ *I am safe*,’ said the Truth Teller, and Jonny noticed that, for the very first time, it didn’t sound sorrowful.

‘Are those your parents?’ a voice said. They all turned when they realized it was Marisa.

Annabelle was still standing next to her, looking both furious and terrified.

‘Mom?’ said Annabelle. ‘Dad?’

There was a pause as everyone realized she was talking to the sheepfish.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us, too, Annabelle,’ the Doctor said.

The sheepfish made a snorkelling sound.

‘But I *like* it here,’ Annabelle said. ‘Everyone obeys me.’

The two sheepfish made further snorkelling sounds that seemed to indicate they’d liked that part, too, but what were you going to do?

‘I heard about the time-fracture accident,’ the man said to Annabelle. ‘Your parents explained it.’

He looked back at the hole where the house used to be. ‘Eventually. You got thrown here by accident, a hundred years before the natural timeline. And that will go some way to mitigating the sentences you’ll be receiving.’

‘Sentences?!’ Annabelle said.

‘Slavery is illegal,’ the man said, suddenly more stern and, it must be said, a bit scary, too. ‘In this solar system and every neighbouring system between here and the Dipthodat homeworld. And even

worse for you –’ he leaned down towards Annabelle – ‘ *I* don’t like it.’

Annabelle looked as if she was going to argue back, but the sheepfish made extensive snorkelling sounds and Annabelle, though still looking peeved, finally said, ‘Oh, all *right*.’ She sighed and shuffled off the coney-collared jacket she was wearing, and before their eyes she …

Changed into one of the sheepfish things. She made an annoyed snorkelling sound at the man.

‘No, I won’t put you in chains,’ the man said, ‘as long as you behave.’

Sheepfish Annabelle went over to her sheepfish parents and a low, snorkelling argument

commenced between them.

‘Can someone please explain what’s going on?’ Nettie said, and Jonny saw she was holding her

soda bottle as a potential weapon, against sheepfish or mysterious Doctors in white sweaters or

British women wearing trousers.

‘Brave heart, Nettie,’ the Doctor said. ‘The danger has passed. Shame I had to destroy their

lodgings, but the Dipthodat can be quite a tiresome species.’

‘Diptho-what?’ Jonny said, his tongue still tripping a little over his Truth Teller.

The Doctor gestured to the sheepfish. ‘Dipthodat. A xenophobic race.’

‘Xeno-what?’ Jonny said.

‘They don’t like anyone who’s not them,’ the Doctor said.

‘You can say that again,’ Nettie said, glaring at the sheepfish, who glared back.

‘They go to planets,’ the Doctor said, ‘stir up unrest among the locals, and feed off the negative energy. That’s what they eat. Their whole diet. All the stuff of strife and anger and hate.’ The Doctor bent down to Jonny’s height and looked at the Truth Teller again. ‘These marvellous little creatures help that task enormously.’ He glanced up into Jonny’s eyes. ‘You convince people that hurling the worst, most painful “truths” at each other is a good idea, and you’ll have enough negative energy to run the world.’

‘They work best on the young,’ Nyssa said. ‘Good people like yourselves. So much seeming truth

that feels so painful. The supply is almost endless. It’s heartbreaking in a way.’

‘We thought they were toys,’ Jonny said.

‘Not toys,’ the Doctor said. ‘Slaves. They’re called the Veritans. Psychic little wonderlings who can seek out what everyone else thinks is the truth. Conquered centuries ago by the Dipthodat and forced into work. Mourning their homeworld, no pay, no comfort, no hope of escape.’ He frowned

once more at the sheepfish. ‘Which is something that makes me very unhappy indeed.’

The sheepfish looked sheepish.

‘They aren’t supposed to be reaching your planet for another hundred years when, happily, you’ll be equipped to deal with them yourselves. These three got stuck here by accident. Took a couple of years to get themselves disguised and established, and then they tapped into a passing black-market slave-trader to find some Veritans.’

‘ *I am safe now*,’ the Truth Teller said again.

‘Yes, you are,’ the Doctor said. ‘And you’re going home.’

‘ *I am going home*,’ the Truth Teller said, and to Jonny, the happiness in its voice was almost heartbreaking.

‘OK,’ Nettie said. ‘Forgive me if I’m being slow here. The Acklins were from outer space all

along?’

‘Is that a relief?’ the Doctor asked.

‘No,’ Nettie said, angrily. ‘They seemed human enough. In all the wrong ways.’ The sheepfish

snorkelled at her. She raised her soda bottle, but this time her face had no fear on it at all.

The Doctor nodded. ‘I’m guessing that the Truth Tellers weren’t the only mischief they caused.’

‘ *Mischief?* ’ Nettie said, annoyed at the word.

‘Well, they’ll be gone soon,’ the Doctor said. ‘Will that perhaps help things around here?’

Nettie nodded, defiant. ‘That will help, yes.’

There was a sudden agitated snorkelling from the Annabelle sheepfish. She contorted halfway back into a human shape and yelled, ‘You put that down! That’s mine!’

The Doctor held her back as she tried to lunge at Marisa who, they could now all see, had picked up Annabelle’s coney-collar coat and was wrapping it around her shoulders.

‘Really?’ Marisa said. ‘I think it probably looks better on me now.’

She swung from side to side, twirling the coat behind her, rubbing her face against the fur. She snapped the collar together under her chin and straightened out the fabric. She looked at Jonny. ‘What do you think?’

‘You …’ Jonny said, watching her closely now, watching how she seemed to be in love with the

coat, watching how her eyebrows were raised in expectation of praise, a look he’d never seen before on her.

Or at least a look he’d never noticed.

‘You look just like Annabelle,’ he said.

‘I don’t look anything like *that*,’ Marisa said, nodding at the Annabelle half-sheepfish.

‘No, but …’ Jonny said but faltered.

‘ *I am suddenly no longer interested in you*,’ his Truth Teller said, ‘ *though I am unclear of the reasons why, exactly*.’

‘You’ll figure them out,’ the Doctor said.

‘You were interested in me?’ Marisa said, a look on her face of what could only be described as

horror.

Jonny heard a sound from Nettie, but when he turned to her, she was innocently whistling into the empty soda bottle.

The sound of sirens rose faintly in the distance. The fire trucks were coming.

‘Quite late after an explosion this big,’ Nettie said.

‘Oh, we have ways of arranging a delay,’ the Doctor said. Then he got a sad look on his face. ‘Mr Heftklammern – fantastic name by the way, don’t ever change it – and Miss Washington. The decent people of this town speak highly of you and the indecent –’ he nodded at the sheepfish – ‘speak very badly indeed, which counts for just as much.’ He sighed. ‘I’ve lost two friends recently. One who died bravely, the other who went back to her own life. Nyssa is a wonderful companion, but I do like to have a big group around me.’ He paused. ‘I don’t suppose either of you would be interested in travelling?’

‘Doctor,’ Nyssa said, a warning tone in her voice.

‘There’s a war on,’ Jonny said. ‘Travel is dangerous.’

‘I can’t,’ Nettie said, at almost the same time. ‘My mother depends on me.’

‘Mine, too,’ Jonny said.

‘But of course,’ the Doctor said. ‘Of course that’s true.’ The sirens were getting closer. ‘Take the Dipthodat to the TARDIS, Nyssa.’ He turned back to Jonny and Nettie. ‘Tell the police you heard an explosion and that’s all you know.’

‘I don’t think they’d believe any of the rest of this anyway,’ Jonny said.

‘I’m not sure *I* believe it,’ Nettie said, ‘and I saw it with my own two eyes.’

‘Are all the Veritans on board?’ the Doctor asked Nyssa.

‘All but one,’ Nyssa said, leading the sheepfish away, the Annabelle one snorkelling loudly at

Marisa, who paid her no mind at all.

‘All but one,’ the Doctor repeated and leaned back down to Jonny. ‘It’s time to go,’ he said to the Truth Teller.

‘ *Freedom*,’ it said.

‘Freedom indeed.’

‘ *I have one more truth to say*,’ it said.

‘I’ll bet you do,’ the Doctor said, but he gently held out his hand before the Truth Teller could speak again. It uncurled itself from Jonny’s chin, walked the two prongs out of his mouth, and twined itself happily on the Doctor’s open palm. The Doctor looked up at Jonny and then over to Nettie. ‘But I suspect that’s a truth our young friend here is better off saying himself.’

A kind of haunted grinding sound filled the inside of the TARDIS as it revved its engines to leave.

‘First drop the Dipthodat off to the appropriate authorities, Doctor?’ Nyssa asked.

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor said, watching the boy and the girl on the screen in front of him.

‘And then where?’

‘Oh, you know,’ he said, as the boy and the girl – not holding hands, not kissing, not anything

ridiculous like that – walked off together after giving whatever explanation sufficed to the firemen.

But they walked off together in a companionable way, a way that

hinted, maybe, just maybe, of futures to come. ‘We’ve got the whole of time and space ahead of us. And behind us, for that matter. And beneath and above …’

‘Doctor …’ Nyssa said, smiling over the basket of sleeping Truth Tellers, who had wound

themselves together in a warm, snoozing ball, murmuring to each other that they were free.

‘All I’m saying, Nyssa,’ the Doctor said, switching off the screen and standing with a flourish, ‘is that, as ever, anything is possible.’

He hit a button, sending the TARDIS flying off into the vast eternity of space and time.

‘Which in the end,’ he said, ‘is all the truth you ever really need.’

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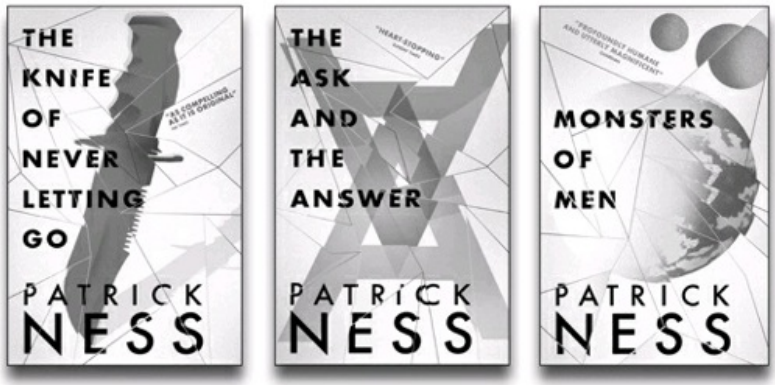

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- Contents
- Tip of the Tongue
  - About Patrick Ness
  - Books by Patrick Ness
  - Tip of the Tongue
- Copyright Page